

Domesticity at Sea: the Example of Charles and Fanny Austen

DEBORAH KAPLAN

Department of English, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030

Jane Austen and her family, friends, and neighbors sought to make their homes comfortable. They wanted to experience, as writer Witold Rybczynski has put it, “the sense of contentment brought about by the enjoyment of one’s physical surroundings.”¹ Comfort was not a grand, aristocratic ideal. Still, it required substantial material resources—a spacious drawing-room, couches and chairs, fireplace, tea service, tasty, well-prepared dinner, windows opening out onto a garden. It also depended on servants who carried, cleaned, and prepared these material pleasures. But comfort was more than just a physical sensation in response to an attractive house. For Austen’s community it meant, too, the experience of intimacy. Intimacy in a hovel provided little ease, but material luxury without intimacy was not gratifying either.

The ideology of domesticity articulated and then perpetuated the idea of home as the site of physical contentment and intimacy. The ideology was first codified in conduct handbooks at the end of the seventeenth century, and it achieved widespread acceptance in the upper and middling ranks of society by the second half of the eighteenth century.² It represented the home as a space for leisure, pleasure, and piety. It also advocated strong emotional attachments among family members. Genteel men and women, according to the ideology, were to marry for love and esteem (although these feelings had to be supported by a sufficient income). They were urged to spend much time together and in the company of their children and to do so, as much as possible, at home. The ideology cast friendships between women in a similar mold. These bonds were envisioned as domestic relationships too, affectionate ties best cultivated within one or the other friend’s household.

Women were in charge of both material and emotional comforts because, according to the domestic ideology, it was their duty to maintain a well-ordered, well-stocked residence. Women, so it was asserted, were also, by virtue of their gender, specialists in sentiment and therefore especially capable of fostering emotionally intimate relationships. The men and women of Austen’s community endorsed these gender-marked beliefs, as a letter sent by James Austen to younger brother Frank, for example, testifies. Frank, a captain in the navy who was soon to marry his fiancée Mary Gibson, received these best wishes from James: “May you . . . reap the reward which your Principles & Exertions deserve in the enjoyment of Domestic Comforts & the Society of Her who can best make your Home comfortable to you.”³

Because women took the duty of creating comfort to heart, the ideal more typically permeated their letters than those of their menfolk. Most genteel women carried on correspondences with numerous female friends and kin, and their letters formed a genre of domesticity, in which were chronicled and catalogued their families’ material and emotional comforts. Rybczynski has

observed that the words “comfort” and “comfortable” frequently appear in Jane Austen’s novels of domestic life.⁴ But many Austen lovers know how commonly these words show up in her letters too, along with “snug,” which she also used when speaking of her intimacies with family members and a few female friends. We encounter in her letters a “comfortable Talk,” and a “comfortable walk,” a “comfortable Letter,” a “snug fortnight” and “Candour & Comfort & Coffee & Cribbage.”⁵ She was happy when engaged in informal and unreserved conversation with relatives and friends and happier still when these tete-a-tetes took place in large, amply-stocked homes. Her brother Edward’s estate at Godmersham was one such setting, and she wrote with evident pleasure to her sister, Cassandra, about being there when their sailor brother Charles, his wife, and their children came to visit in 1813. So large was the house and so well-provided with amenities, that the family was able to be alone together – to sit “snugly talking” in the library – even though there were other guests staying in the house.⁶

The same attention to domestic comfort punctuates the letters of other women in Austen’s genteel community. In 1801 Hampshire neighbor Anne Powlett sent her friend Padgy Peters a description of the nearby Hampshire residence of Peters’ widowed brother. Padgy was thinking of moving in with him: “The House you may suppose is small, but I think with your management might be made thoroughly comfortable and convenient for two Persons and a Servant. In short, my dear Friend, if I know your Heart I think you would be happy at Ovington.”⁷ “We spent a quiet and comfortable day,” wrote Anne Lefroy in the same year about a visit to her recently married daughter.⁸ And Jane Austen’s thirteen-year-old niece used the word when writing to a former governess: “Aunt Cassandra comes down on Monday next, which will be very comfortable, as she had not been staying here by herself for some time.”⁹

That genteel men and women held to the ideal of comfort became particularly evident in circumstances where that ideal was not so easy to realize in conventional ways. Making a home aboard a naval ship was probably the most difficult domestic challenge faced by the men and women of Austen’s community. Because men in the Royal Navy from Austen’s social world were commissioned officers, they had rooms of their own on ships. Those spaces, however, were often small. The captain of a man-of-war (assuming that there was no admiral aboard) had to himself a stern gallery; two quarter galleries, one of which was usually his lavatory; a smaller sleeping cabin; and the “coach,” an ante-room or dining cabin. These last cabins opened out onto the quarter deck on which only officers were allowed. A captain could furnish his rooms in whatever way he wished and could afford. Some brought considerable stores of furniture, books, and fine wine on board. Occasionally, they also brought on mistresses or wives and children.¹⁰ These passengers sailed with the captain when he was transferred to a new station, afterwards taking up residence on the nearest-by land. Or, they lived with him on board.

How comfortable would women and children have found this floating home? Certainly, compared to the living situation of the ordinary crewman,

their shipboard homes were luxurious. The hundreds of seamen could bring only what could be stored in a single trunk – clothes, for the most part. They slept in hammocks crowded together on the gun or lower deck, and they ate in this dark, unventilated space as well. But for genteel women, the more relevant comparison was not to the crewman's lot on shipboard but to the homes of the genteel on land.

Austen's novel *Persuasion* maintains that domestic life at sea for women could be desirable and satisfying. Captain Frederick Wentworth teases the Musgrove sisters for "supposing sailors to be living on board without any thing to eat, or any cook to dress it if there were, or any servant to wait, or any knife and fork to use." But though he asserts the gentility of daily life on a ship (for officers), he does not approve of women and families entering into it. It is "impossible," he insists, "to make the accommodations on board, such as women ought to have."¹¹

Austen puts the case for women and children on board into Mrs. Croft's capable hands. The estimable woman's argument rests on her definition of what it means to be comfortable. It is a genteel value, but it is not consistent, according to Mrs. Croft, with formal and overly refined expectations (so often associated in the novel with the snobbish Sir Walter Elliot and his eldest daughter). "I hate to hear you talking so," she tells Wentworth, "like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures." Physical contentment may be found on a man-of-war and even on the smaller frigates. In the latter, she admits "you are more confined – though any reasonable woman may be perfectly happy in one of them."¹² Most important, comfort is to be found on board in the intimacy preserved by keeping husbands and wives together. Mrs. Croft assures her brother:

I can safely say, that the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship. While we were together, you know, there was nothing to be feared. . . . The only time that I ever really suffered in body or mind . . . or had any ideas of danger, was the winter that I passed by myself at Deal, when the Admiral (*Captain Croft* then) was in the North Seas. I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should hear from him next; but as long as we could be together, nothing ever ailed me.¹³

Mrs. Croft makes a powerful argument – in fiction. But what did actual women think of the prospects for domestic comfort on ships? A young woman who married into the Austen family, Frances Fitzwilliam Palmer, offers rich testimony in the twelve of her letters that have survived. Her accounts of her day-to-day life, as well as the responses of those who knew her, give us a much more complex view of women and families who set up homes at sea with their men.

Fanny Palmer met Jane Austen's youngest brother Charles in Bermuda in 1804. He had been assigned to the North American Station where his main duty, as Captain of the *Indian* under Admiral John Warren, was to prevent neutral countries from trading with France. She was living in Bermuda with her sister Esther and her sister's husband James Christie Esten, Chief Justice

of Bermuda. Charles and Fanny were married on the island in 1807, when he was in his late twenties and Fanny was about seventeen.

Fanny's earliest extant letters were written from Halifax in 1810. Charles was sent there from Bermuda in May of that year, and Fanny and their children—two-year-old Cassy and three-month-old Harriet—sailed along with him. The first of her letters, written to her sister Esther in Bermuda, opens in a familiar way: "We arrived here my beloved Sister on the 28th May after a very comfortable passage. . . . Neither Lady Warren or myself were thoroughly sick, tho we felt uncomfortable, the first day; poor little Cass was very sick, but I think it was of great service to her, for she is looking better than I ever saw her; & is so riotous & unmanageable, that I can do nothing with her."

These lines are characteristic of Fanny Austen. Her letters reveal a sweet-tempered woman in love with her husband and attempting to view her experience in the best light. The trip by sea was comfortable, she asserted, though she wasn't wholly free of seasickness. Although her older daughter was "very sick," that sickness was ultimately, Fanny suggested, beneficial to the child's health. Fanny also offered "Riotous & unmanageable" as signs of improvement, though we don't usually think of them that way. Did she think Cassy at two was usually too quiet and passive? Her description of their lodgings similarly shows her determination to be pleased: "Lady Warren has very kindly given us the room Mrs. Sedley used to have, which is on the same side, with the Drawing-Room; so that we are not at all inconvenienced, by the noises of the Hospital."

She expressed unhappiness, like Mrs. Croft, only about being separated from her husband. But she didn't like to dwell on such feelings. "My dear Charles," she informed her sister, "expects to sail, shortly, on a Cruize, which of course makes me rather melancholy, but I assure you, I am as happy, as it is possible for me to be, away from my friends. Lady Warren & the Admiral are both extremely kind & attentive to me & are very fond of my little Cassy."¹⁴

In September 1810, Charles took command of the *Cleopatra*, and in the early spring of 1811 he sailed her to England, bringing Fanny and their daughters with him. In addition to being able to remain with her husband, Fanny must have wanted to make the trip so that she could be near her parents and her other sister, Harriet, who were living in London. Arriving in England, the Austens had almost immediately to face the problem of how to live on Charles' small income. "There must be always something to wish for," wrote his sister Cassandra to a cousin, Philadelphia Whitaker (nee Walter), in August of that year, "and for Charles we have to wish for rather more money. So expensive as every thing in England is now, even the necessaries of life, I am afraid they will find themselves very, very poor."¹⁵

In November 1811 Charles was appointed to the *Namur*, anchored off Sheerness at the Nore. As Flag Captain under Commander-in-Chief Sir Thomas Williams, Charles was responsible for supervising all naval recruits in the Thames and eastern ports and for manning the warships being readied for action in the Thames and Medway. Driven by financial necessity, Charles

and Fanny decided to make their home on his ship. As Cassandra wrote to Philadelphia early in 1813, "she [Fanny] and his children are actually living with him on board. We had doubted whether such a scheme would prove practicable during the winter, but they have found their residence very tolerably comfortable and it is so much the cheapest home she could have that they are very right to put up with little inconveniences."¹⁶

"Very tolerably comfortable," suggested Cassandra, but Fanny's letters early in 1812 expressed much more enthusiasm for her new home. "Extremely comfortable," is what she called it in a letter to her brother-in-law in Bermuda, and she offered the corroborating praise of two visitors—her mother and nephew.¹⁷ In a subsequent letter, she retailed the appreciation of her father, who had come aboard for a visit: "He is very much pleased with our accommodations & enjoys sleeping in a Cot extremely."¹⁸

Although some of her words link Fanny Austen with Mrs. Croft, her use of exaggerated diction to describe fairly rudimentary accommodations (can anyone like sleeping in a cot "extremely"?) creates a too insistently cheerful tone that makes her attitude more complex than the fictional character's. Her remarks about health also suggest a subtly mixed response to domesticity on shipboard. In the first letters written after the family had settled on the *Namur*, Fanny was urging one of her sisters, who had been sick and was staying in London, to take advantage of the curative powers of sea air. Their father's visit, after all, she noted, had enabled him to get rid of his cough. He "looks infinitely better than when he came to us," Fanny maintained.¹⁹ Her children, she also assured her sister, have "never enjoyed better health, than since they have been living on board." The diction again verges on the hyperbolic. But she also mentioned an outbreak of illness on the *Namur*, and her references to it display a sensible, hopeful attitude and then an anxious undercurrent. She and Charles had decided not to remove their children from the ship: "from our situation here, they may frequently be exposed to the same, & many other disorders of that nature; therefore, we must make the best of it." She revealed her anxiety by attributing alarm to her sister, assuring her that they would never let *her* child come on board when an epidemic threatened.²⁰

No letters have survived from the next year and a half, but we encounter Fanny's perceptions about her shipboard home again in two that she wrote in the fall of 1813. She expressed concern in them but only about the difficulty of hiring and retaining female servants willing and hearty enough for shipboard employment. Still, her tone was less determinedly upbeat, and she now mused directly on the key problem concerning domestic comfort that she and Charles were facing. She very much appreciated the comfort of intimacy. Naval wives had to live for long periods of time without their husbands, but in recent years Fanny has been spared separations. Precisely because she and the children were able to live with Charles, however, the family had had to go without much of that other kind of comfort derived from an environment with substantial material resources. "I am afraid that three years indulgence have quite spoiled me," she wrote to her brother-in-law in October, "& do not know how I shall reconcile myself to Capt. Austen's

going to Sea again: he is very anxious to be in active service just now & I am of course obliged to acquiesce in the propriety of his wishing it, but something tells me that we are much happier in our present situation; however that being only a temporary one, it is but right that he should endeavour to be in the way of making a little Money while there is an opportunity.”²¹

Moreover, the environmental stresses of life on shipboard were by 1813 clearly interrupting the intimate family relationships she so cherished. In November of that year, she happily described to her sister in London her cozy sleeping arrangements. “Little Fan” – her youngest daughter, not quite a year old – “sleeps close to my Bedside in one of the small Bedsteads, with the side out, which I find much more convenient than her Cot, as I can hush her off to sleep without getting out of Bed.” But if shipboard living made for snug groupings of the family, there are signs in these letters that life on the water was breaking up that affectionate society as well. Their daughter Harriet was staying at that time with Fanny’s sister in London and she, Cassy, and “Little Fan” too were frequently sent to stay with either her or members of his family, at Chawton, to avoid months of harsh weather and rough seas. “I have been thinking that we must bring our dear little Harriet down with us when we return [probably from Christmas visits to their Austen and Palmer relatives],” she wrote her sister, “as I am afraid she will forget us.”²²

Letters written by Fanny between February and July 1814, more than two years after she had settled on board the *Namur*, show none of the enthusiasm for domestic life on shipboard that she expressed early in 1812. Indeed, in these letters Fanny often sounds irritated. She was separated from her children for substantial periods – Cassy spent time both at Chawton and in London with Fanny’s sister during this period and Harriet and Little Fanny were also often in London. Referring to the two younger girls, she wrote in March that she “did not wish to have either of the Children on board here as long as the Cold weather lasted.”²³ Though she and Charles had resolved not to remove the children from the ship to protect them from illness, when measles broke out on the *Namur* in June, they no longer adopted an attitude of resilience. Wishing their children to avoid exposure, they sent the girls to relatives.²⁴

Fanny’s letters in this period register some frustration at being separated from her children. The detailed instructions that she sent to her sister for curing her youngest daughter’s cough indicate her desire to take care of the little girl herself.²⁵ And she was unable to go to London to be with her daughter Harriet for the child’s birthday. As she wrote her sister in February: “I am very much disappointed at being prevented spending my sweet little Harriets birth-day with her, but you well know the uncertainty of Naval people, & that their private arrangements must yield to public duty, indeed I find there is so little use in planning any thing of the kind, that I have now quite given it up.”²⁶

“Our present life is so unsettled & we are so continually roving about,” she wrote to Esther, her older sister in Bermuda, referring to their domestic arrangements aboard the *Namur* as well as to the numerous visits she and her husband had made during the winter. “I thought an additional Servant would

rather be a plague than a comfort until we are settled on Shore in some way or other," she continued in the same letter.²⁷ Her surviving letters do not explain why she and Charles had apparently decided to move to land, but we do know that Fanny was pregnant with their fourth child in the winter of 1814. Presumably they did not think that a couple with that many small children could live smoothly and safely aboard. Moreover, it would have been harder to farm out *four* children among their relatives in rough, inclement weather.

Like many genteel women of her day, Fanny expressed discontent to women to whom she felt close, in this case, her two sisters. She was unlikely to have offered such sentiments to her husband, for well-bred women, schooled in domestic ideology, hid their dissatisfaction and anger from their male kin.²⁸ One letter Fanny wrote in 1814 makes clear that she told her sister Harriet things that she had no intention of communicating to Charles. She wrote while on a visit to Sir Thomas Williams, the Admiral under whom Charles served, and Lady Williams. Fanny wanted to get back to the *Namur*, but the Austens' visit had just been prolonged: "Tho I receive every kindness & attention from them both, I cannot help feeling a great desire *to be at home*, however uncomfortable that home may be – but I must submit & pretend to like it; I believe Capt. Austen rather wishes to stay than otherwise."²⁹ "Uncomfortable," she said. We are a long way from Mrs. Croft and her assertion "that nothing can exceed the accommodations of a man of war."³⁰

Park Honan, one of Jane Austen's most recent biographers, has suggested that the novelist "drew on some aspects of her [Fanny] for Mrs Croft in *Persuasion*."³¹ That is, no doubt, true, but the differences more than the similarities between Fanny Austen and the novel character illuminate the transformative process of fiction writing. Austen assigned the defense of women on shipboard to a character who, unlike her sister-in-law, had no children. She also has her character rely on retrospection. Mrs. Croft looks back on her domestic life at sea and from a now secure position – her husband is an Admiral with wealth enough to enable them to live at Kellynch Hall. We should not, therefore, suspect the genuineness of her argument in favor of shipboard domesticity. But we should be aware of the conditions in the novel that make her enthusiasm possible.

What would Mrs. Harville have said had Austen chosen her as the spokesperson? She knows the comforts of family intimacy *and* the discomforts of a small income. We might also note that the plot is structured in a way that prevents the heroine, Anne Elliot, from experiencing Mrs. Harville's (or Fanny Austen's) circumstances. The painful but elegantly attractive problem of Anne's isolation as an unmarried woman takes the place of the other possibility proposed in the novel – marriage at nineteen to a man without "alliance or fortune." We are not shown Anne, as Lady Russell had envisioned her, in love with Wentworth but "sunk by him into a state of most wearing, anxious, youth killing dependance!"³² Admiral Croft claims that Wentworth would not oppose women living on shipboard if he were married. It is precisely his bachelor status that enables him to hold to his opinion. But the Admiral's observation can be extended to the heroine's plot as a whole: it

keeps the heroine away from the necessity of seeking conjugal intimacy in confined and somewhat rude surroundings.

Persuasion is not *about* why women should live with their husbands on ships. It makes that case—with some distortion of women's real-life experiences—as part of a larger advocacy of particular values, which Austen assigned to Naval officers and their families. The novel sometimes simplifies and idealizes, but it does so in order to construct a profound, ideological vision of cultural change. It champions a spirited professional and entrepreneurial social group, showing it to be morally superior to the traditionally dominant landowning gentry and aristocracy and to offer women as well as men happier and more vital social roles.

Twenty-four-year-old Fanny died just a few months after writing the letters to her sisters that describe her *discomforts* on board the *Namur*. She died, like so many other women of her time, while giving birth; her newborn daughter succumbed a few days later. We do not know where she and Charles would have established another home or whether, when settled on land, Fanny's spirits would have risen once more. But the happiness and stresses of intimate family life on the *Namur* survived—not in Jane Austen's fiction but in the poignant form of Charles Austen's dreams. The widower kept diaries while at sea, which mix accounts of his professional duties with his private sentiments. Entries for the spring of 1815 testify to a man still grief-stricken at the loss not only of his wife but also of his day-to-day life with his family.

Longing for a more active post after Fanny's death, he got appointed to the *Phoenix* and headed for the Mediterranean, leaving his children in London in the care of his sister-in-law Harriet. In March, after Napoleon escaped from Elba, he pursued a Neapolitan squadron thought to be in the Adriatic, and in May he organized a blockade of the port of Brindisi.³³ But all the while images of his family ran through his mind. After receiving a letter from his sister-in-law in early May telling him that two of his children were ill, he had dreams that little Fanny was dying, that she was dead, that he was playing with his daughter Harriet "in her bed as I have often done in happier day's." Asleep, he met his wife again too. "A fine night," goes another entry from this period, "dreamed of Dearest Fanny that I was again blessed with her society."³⁴

NOTES

My thanks to Jack Breihan for useful information about the Royal Navy. For permission to cite from their manuscript collections, I am also grateful to the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Centre for Kentish Studies, the National Maritime Museum, and the owners of the Powlett and Lefroy papers.

¹ Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 120.

² For discussions of the ideology of domesticity, see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984) and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).

- ³ *Austen Papers, 1704-1856*, ed. R. A. Austen-Leigh (Colchester: Ballantine Press, 1942), p. 236.
- ⁴ Rybczynski, p. 120.
- ⁵ *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (1952; rpt. Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 201, 357, 367, 194, and 302.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 353.
- ⁷ Powlett Collection.
- ⁸ Lefroy Collection.
- ⁹ Centre for Kentish Studies, U951 C105/11.
- ¹⁰ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: an Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), pp. 65-67.
- ¹¹ Jane Austen, *Persuasion in The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd ed. (1932; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), Vol. V, pp. 64, 68-69.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- ¹⁴ Pierpont Morgan Library (hereafter PML), MA4500 A9338 (1).
- ¹⁵ *Austen Papers*, p. 249.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 251-52.
- ¹⁷ PML MA4500 A9338.E79 (1).
- ¹⁸ PML MA4500 A9338 (4).
- ¹⁹ PML MA4500 A9338 (5).
- ²⁰ PML MA4500 A9338 (4).
- ²¹ PML MA4500 A9338.E79 (2).
- ²² PML MA4500 A9338.P174 (1).
- ²³ PML MA4500 A9338 (6).
- ²⁴ PML MA4500 A9338.E79 (3).
- ²⁵ PML MA4500 A9338.P174 (3).
- ²⁶ PML MA4500 A9338.P174 (2).
- ²⁷ PML MA4500 A9338 (6).
- ²⁸ For a discussion of these communication patterns, see my *Jane Austen among Women* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1992).
- ²⁹ PML MA4500 A9338.P174 (3).
- ³⁰ Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 70.
- ³¹ Park Honan, *Jane Austen: Her Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 331.
- ³² Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 27.
- ³³ George Holbert Tucker, *A Goodly Heritage: A History of Jane Austen's Family* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983), p. 186.
- ³⁴ National Maritime Museum, AUS/102.